



## The Impact of Authoritarian Coaching Styles on Athletes' Anxious States

**Shiloh Hagerty**

*Millersville University – Shippensburg University, Joint MSW Program*

**Marc V. Felizzi**

*School of Social Work, Millersville University*

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*The competitive nature of sports can exacerbate an athlete's anxiety state. Anxiety may impact an athlete's cognitive and behavioral functioning, which in turn affects their performance. Athletes handle an increased amount of pressure and can be affected by an emotionally abusive or authoritarian style of coaching. Self-determination theory can serve as the underpinning for two different coaching styles, authoritarian and autonomy-supportive, that can impact an athletes' anxiety. An authoritarian coaching style may be defined as one where the coach has set strict rules and structure for their athletes, but not freedom enough to provide a sense of autonomy among participants (Brinton, Hill & Ward, 2017). An autonomy -supportive coaching style may be defined as one where the coach creates a culture whereby athletes are provided choices, within certain guidelines, allows athletes to take initiatives and avoids guilt inducing and shaming behaviors. (Brinton, Hill & Ward, 2017) An autonomy-supportive coaching style may reduce athletes' anxiety and enhance the athlete's wellbeing and athletic performance while an authoritarian style can induce and sustain athletes' anxiety symptoms. Social learning theory provides awareness of how coaches internalize styles of coaching and offers interventions that can be used to instill a positive coaching style with athletes. Sport social workers hold unique qualities to provide effective interventions at the micro and macro level. At the individual level, sport social workers can utilize evidence-based interventions including CBT and mindfulness to reduce anxiety symptoms and teach coping skills. At the organizational level, sport social workers can provide education and awareness of mental health and teach autonomy-supportive coaching. Sport social workers are an integral factor to assuring a safe, positive environment in the athletic arena.*

*Keywords: sport social work, athlete anxiety, autonomy-supportive style coaching, authoritarian style coaching, self-determination theory*

Despite studies which promote pro-social coaching methods, examples of an outdated and archaic style of authoritarian coaching are often prevalent in society (Kerr, Wilson & Stirling, 2020; Kim, Hing, Magnuson & Rhee, 2020; Lopez, Dohm & Posig, 2020). While these studies detail the effects and correlations of a number of mental health issues impacted by an authoritarian coaching style, the anxiety suffered by athletes working with a strict, authoritarian coach is also often understudied. Indeed, while an authoritarian and emotionally abusive coach may believe their actions promote motivation, the athlete may view these behaviors as negative and hurtful, and at the very least, anxiety provoking. This paper will discuss the role of an authoritarian coaching style on athlete's anxiety, as well as interventions that can assist both coaches and athletes in creating a positive, autonomy supportive culture in their program, free of authoritarian and potentially abusive coaching.

Athletes, at all levels of sports, are particularly susceptible to experiencing anxiety, and may be more vulnerable if they enter their sport prone to anxiety in their world outside of athletics (Reardon, et al, 2021). Close to 85% of student-athletes suffer from an anxiety disorder in the United States (Howell, 2021). Anxiety in an athlete can be exacerbated by a coach who is authoritarian, or one who displays abusive (emotionally or psychologically) coaching behaviors towards their athletes. Anxiety is often described as a reaction by an individual to a stress inducing situation, and athletes in competitive and high-level sports potentially have higher levels of performance-related stress, and therefore, anxiety (Moore & Gummelt, 2019).

Coaches may behave in an authoritarian or abusive manner as they may have been trained in a system that was not considered best practice in today's world. The behaviors they display may be the only approach they know (Simoni, 2022). Coaching, while a stressful position no matter what the skill level of the sport may be, offers challenges for a coach to tolerate distress, perceived poor play or practice. These challenges for coaches may, due to their own lack of insight, cause a coach to lash out, and act negatively towards athletes (Simoni, 2022).

Many athletes fondly recall the positive experiences with their coaches while others focus on negative coaching experiences (Fraser-Thomas & Cote 2009). When young athletes were asked to comment on the most positive quality of their coaches, many describe the relationships created, the praise and encouragement, as well as the support and trustworthiness they experienced with their coaches being supportive and trustworthy (Strand, 2021). When the same group of youth athletes were asked to identify the most negative aspect of their athletic experience, the most frequently mentioned factor was the style of coaching displayed. Many of these young athletes listed spotlighting, yelling/scolding/bad attitude towards players, rude responses to players, and choosing favorites as the most negative characteristics of the coaches (Strand, 2021).

The extant literature states that coaches have a deep and impactful effect on their athletes (Dohsten, Barker-Ruchti, Lindgren, & Hanson 2021; Loy 2019; Stankovich 2011). Coaches' behavior often impacts an athlete's stress level, feelings of burnout, anxiety and ultimately, their mental health (Mottaghi, Attarodi & Rohani, 2013; Weathington, Alexander & Rodebaugh, 2010). Authoritarian, or shaming coaching behaviors can affect an athletes' self-concept, as well as the playing experience (Seongkwan, Choi & Kim, 2019). Eventually, authoritarian, coaching practices and behaviors may become the norm for coaches, athletes, and parents, and such behaviors may be accepted by those involved with the athletic program (Stirling and Kerr 2009; Strand, 2021).

Athletes reporting positive relationships and experiences with their coaches displayed lower anxiety levels, higher degrees of self-esteem, more positive motivational cultures, and were less likely to drop-out of athletic participation (Stewart, 2016). Negative athletic cultures resulted in higher player anxiety and performance-related worry which reduced the athlete's abilities to maintain focus on learning and eroded their self-confidence. These negative feelings and perceptions remained, even if they switched programs or participated on new teams. (Stewart, 2016).

Among the aspects of a negative coaching culture, athletes most frequently report that coaches are the perpetrators of emotionally harmful behaviors (Kerr et al., 2020), although the acceptance of emotionally abusive behaviors is also seen within other positions of power in sport, such as sport administrators. Emotionally abusive behaviors include belittling comments, ignoring the athlete, preying on their emotions, utilizing psychological abuse or excessive and unnecessary criticism (Kerr, et al., 2020). Jacobs, Smits & Knoppers (2017), found that high-performance athletic or program directors accepted these behaviors as part of coaching, even though they had acknowledged that some of their coaches' actions could be seen as inappropriate. To that end, administrators rarely intervened when witnessing these coaching behaviors (Jacobs et al., 2017). Even parents of elite athletes appear to be socialized in ways to also accept these emotionally harmful behaviors as an expected and necessary part of developing athletic talent (Kerr & Stirling, 2012). The normalization of such abuse in sport, along with authoritarian coaching ideals has become a challenge in remedying the behavior because it is so engrained in the sport culture (Kerr, et al, 2020).

## Literature Review

The ability to obtain an optimal and stable psychological state during athletic competition is an important factor to coaches and athletes (Gonzalez-Hernandez et al., 2020) Many athletes are vulnerable to anxiety because of the competitive nature of the sport, which can increase athletes' frequency and severity of symptoms, and may ultimately affect their ability to function (Goldman, 2022). Ford et al. (2017) defined anxiety as "an unpleasant psychological state in reaction to perceived stress concerning the performance of a task under pressure" (p. 206) and more specifically defined sport-related anxiety as a trait and or response to a stressful sport-related situation that the athlete perceives as potentially stressful and results in a range of cognitive assessment (negative thoughts), behavioral response (fidgeting, biting nails), and or a psychological response (sweating, increased heart rate). Additional signs and symptoms of anxiety include feeling apprehensive, feeling powerless, sense of impending danger, panic, rapid breathing, sweating, trembling, and feeling weak or tired (Goldman, 2022). There are several types of anxiety that athletes experience including, cognitive (negative thoughts), somatic (physiological response) (Hernandez et al., 2020), and social (fear of social interaction and negative evaluation) (Peterson, 2019).

### Anxiety

Anxiety is a common experience among athletes of all ages and levels of performance. Almost half of children and adolescents throughout the world participate in an organized sport (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021). In the United States (U.S.), approximately one in three adolescents (31.9%) meet criteria for an anxiety disorder and almost half begin experiencing

symptoms of anxiety before age six. The NCAA found that approximately 85% of certified athletic trainers believe anxiety is a current issue among college student athletes (Goldman, 2022; Moore & Gummelt, 2019). Results of studies showed that female and younger athletes are at a greater risk of anxiety (Terres-Barcala et al., 2022), and higher levels of somatic anxiety are experienced by females and cognitive anxiety in males (Hernandez et al., 2020). Anxiety can negatively impact athlete's self-confidence, performance abilities, lead to burnout (Peterson, 2019; Terres-Barcala et al., 2022), increased risk of sport injury (Ford et al., 2017), and negative self-conscious and distraction from the present moment (Lyon & Plisco, 2020). Anxiety can be detrimental to adolescents' overall wellbeing (biological, psychological, and sociological) and the high amount of pressure in athletic competitions can exacerbate anxiety symptoms.

Several factors contribute to anxiety as an issue among athletes. Numerous athletes experience anxiety in response to being evaluated by their athletic ability, fear of failure (central threat), fear of social consequences, and worry that they will not live up to adults' (coaches/parents) expectations (Correia & Rosado, 2018). Additionally, athletes can experience sport-anxiety due to having an unhealthy athletic identity (Moore & Gummelt, 2019), an expectation of mental toughness that leads to suppressed emotions, resistance to seeking help and support (Lyons & Plisco, 2020), impulsiveness, and inadequate recovery from practice (overtraining) (Terres-Barcala et al., 2022). Most athletes, especially adolescents, who experience symptoms of mental illness, are often not encouraged to seek treatment, do not receive appropriate evaluation or treatment due to stigma, and find that there is a lack of mental health services. Kroshus et al. (2019), noted that coaches reported barriers they had faced that prevented them from supporting athletes with mental health concerns including beliefs that athletes will not follow through with referral to mental health services, athletes are unwilling to disclose concerns to coaches, and coaches not feeling confident in their ability to identify mental health signs in athletes.

Coaches have the power to keep anxiety "alive" in athletes. Different coaching styles, and the way in which they lead and provide correction and feedback during practices and games, can impact athletes' anxiety (Peterson, 2019). Coaches have power over athletes' playing time, the awarding and maintaining of college athletes' scholarship, transfer opportunities, and quality of life. Although tolerance of abusive and inadequate coaching that can exacerbate mental illness in athletes appears to be diminishing (Roxas & Ridinger, 2016), self-determination theory provides an understanding of why anxiety in athletes continues to be an issue through the explanation of coaching styles in organized sport.

### **Self Determination Theory**

The relationship between coaches and athletes has a powerful impact on an athlete's overall wellbeing (Roxas & Ridinger, 2016). Self-determination theory explains two dominant and commonly used coaching styles in sports, authoritarian and autonomy-supportive coaching. An autonomy-supportive coaching style is displayed by coaches helping athletes set and reach goals through use of encouragement and refraining from criticism. This style of coaching can reduce anxiety and may in fact provide athletes skills to overcome their anxiety. Coaches provide athletes with options, and help the athlete develop their own individual plan to improve. When an athlete feels listened to, cared for, and respected it provides motivation and promotes autonomy, competency, and feelings of connection, which increases overall wellbeing and decreases anxiety.

Conversely, authoritarian coaching styles may induce feelings of guilt, shame, conditional regard (the coach will like me only if I succeed), which in turn reduces competency, confidence, and worsens anxiety. Coaches who give individual athletes correction and feedback in front of a group (team/crowd/peers) can be a major anxiety trigger, causing athletes to feel embarrassed, anxious, and shameful and is one of the largest social anxiety stressors in sports (Peterson, 2019). Coaches using authoritarian style coaching often engage in negative behaviors, such as yelling when they are angry and using fear and intimidation (Roxas & Ridinger, 2016). Additionally, it was found that coaches who provide unsupportive and criticizing correction after a poor performance can negatively impact the coach-athlete relationship (Peterson, 2019). These coaching behaviors foster a negative coach-athlete relationship and increases all forms of sport related anxiety. The more negative rapport behaviors athletes experience from coaches, the more feelings of tenseness, less self-confidence, negative cognitions, and decreased attention and performance they endure (Roxas & Ridinger, 2016).

### **Social Learning Theory**

An authoritarian coaching style can be illustrated by social learning theory and the power and control wheel (fig. 1). Throughout the history of sports, numerous coaches have used an authoritarian coaching style, mostly learned by observation of prior coaches. An authoritarian style is utilized to control players through use of coercion, intimidation, and instilling fear. Aggressiveness and controlling behaviors are a phenomenon and a process influenced by cultural and environment that mimic the power control wheel. "Power denotes the ability to make decisions for you and for the others, to influence, to control. Power is manifested in any type of relationships; it creates patterns, hierarchies, rules and models" (Irimescu et al., 2019, p. 17). The power and control wheel describes the aggressor's (coach) use of coercion and threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, economic abuse, use of male privilege, use of children, using isolation, and use of blaming (Irimescu, 2019). These factors have been linked to authoritarian coaching styles, many of which are learned behaviors from personal experiences as well as through social and public media.

The Power and Control Wheel (Waldron, 2021), is illustrated in the appendix, and is presented as it applies to coaching. The illustration uses the examples of what behaviors authoritarian coaches may use when attempting to gain emotional or sexual control over an athlete. The wheel provides examples of what such coaches may say and do to an athlete in order to gain control over the individual. Included in each corner are examples of what authoritarian coaches might say to justify their behaviors with athletes.

In order to mitigate behaviors which are illustrated in the Power & Control Wheel, sport social workers can utilize social learning theory as an intervention to implement self-determination theory of autonomy supportive coaching styles while simultaneously helping individual athletes change self-limiting behaviors. Behavior within a culture such as an athletic team, can be explained by Social Learning theory. Bandura, (1977), advanced the idea that learning may begin before experience; therefore, the observation of inappropriate behavior may serve as a reinforcement in a youth's mind to act out accordingly (Bandura, 1977). Families or influential adults in a young person's life who display inappropriate behavior, may provide numerous opportunities for a child to observe such behavior, therefore reinforcing the idea that inappropriate acting out such as yelling, demeaning and demanding behavior is an approved family or adult norm.

Bandura (1977) also posited that motivation was critical in the learning process. The idea of motivation was introduced into the learning of behaviors through vicarious reinforcement and self-reinforcement. Vicarious reinforcement is the process of learning a behavior through observing the reinforcing or punishing consequences of others who commit a behavior. This concept, also referred to as modeling, is an “essential function in learning aggressive behavior” (Bandura, 1977). Bandura and Walters (1963) proposed that children are reminded of aggressive or inappropriate behavior by the discipline enforced by caregivers, which is enacted to receive preferred results-compliance. Children, in turn, resort to aggression rather than discipline to obtain a “desired outcome” such as compliance. In terms of this paper, that behavior would be displayed in aggression, bullying, yelling or profanity usage towards athletes. In coaching, such behavior could be learned by witnessing an adult coach act in an offensive manner towards an athlete or a team. Additionally, athletes, by observing the rewards that power over the victim brings the perpetrator can be reinforced to replicate such behavior. Self-reinforcement refers to the drive to act in a way that gains self-approval, such as pride or a sense of accomplishment through a behavior (Bandura, 1977). A young athlete who prides himself or herself in displaying authoritarian behavior in diffuse settings may feel a sense of fulfillment by replicating such behaviors when they enter the coaching ranks.

Sport social workers must consider the origin of the behaviors and thoughts to facilitate positive change, in working with both athletes and coaches a social worker is in a unique position to identify negative coaching styles with negative outcomes on athletes. Athletes and their environment mirror each other, therefore if the coach is controlling the athlete, such behavior will negatively impact the athlete. Social workers using social learning theory can help athletes and coaches see the consequences of their thoughts and behaviors and how they impact their ideal self and the ideal athlete (Moore & Gummelt, 2019).

## **Interventions**

The majority of mental health services in the United States are provided by social workers (NASW, 2022). Social Workers specializing in sport promote social justice and social change through direct and indirect practice at the micro and macro levels through use of clinical practice, community organizing, advocacy, policy development, education, and research (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). Sport social workers can utilize social learning theory through practice interventions with athletes and athletic organization staff. By use of clinical practice, individual and organizational assessments, planning, and intervening to handle challenges across all athletic system levels, sport social workers can make change in coaching styles and athletes mental health. Sport social workers can recognize early signs and symptoms of anxiety to address early and appropriately by use of valid and reliable mental health screening tools (Ford et al., 2017).

## **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**

Several evidence-based interventions, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness, motivational interviewing, and the use of certain psychopharmacological interventions, can be used with individual athletes experiencing anxiety and other mental health symptoms. CBT has proven to be effective with athletes experiencing mental health concerns and may be integrated with other interventions (Edmonds, Craig, Christopher, Kennedy & Mann, 2020; Moore & Gummelt, 2019). When in a positive, safe environment, team sports can be used

as exposure therapy to reduce anxiety and overcome fear and negative cognitions (Peterson, 2019). Additionally, cognitive anxiety can be used to increase psychological functioning. Sport social workers can use psychological training to enhance self-confidence with athletes by promoting self-acceptance in reducing the belief in younger athletes that they cannot lose and through perception of competition of adolescents to learn how to observe their improvements (Gonzalez-Hernandez et al., 2020). Sport social workers can utilize goal setting, relaxation strategies, positive self-talk, and social support to assist athletes in using coping skills and reducing anxiety symptoms (Ford et al., 2017). There is a considerable amount of evidence-based research supporting the effectiveness of mindfulness interventions with athletes. Sport social workers can enhance mindfulness traits to decrease impulsive behaviors, prevent negative cognitions, reduce anxiety, and enhance sports performance (Terres-Barcala et al., 2022; Lyon & Plisco, 2020). Using these interventions to enhance athletes' overall wellbeing and functioning is significant in creating change, however, to create and sustain change it is critical that sport social workers also intervene with coaching staff.

### **Education and Training of Coaches**

One key factor in reducing negative coaching styles is through education and training. Currently in the U.S. there are minimal requirements of training for youth coaches. Increasing a coach's knowledge of mental health by providing education of signs and symptoms is the first step of action. Coaches have direct contact with athletes and must be able to identify when an athlete is suffering from mental health symptoms and refer to a sport social worker or other mental health professional. In addition to educating coaches on athlete mental health, training coaches at all levels of autonomy-supportive coaching styles may be one of the most important steps in sustaining change (Peterson, 2019). Coaches need education that teaches coaching styles geared toward increasing autonomy-supportive behaviors and decreasing controlling behaviors. Specific interventions to be taught to coaches for autonomy-supportive style are to allow athletes input in decision making, offer athletes choices, and how to provide feedback and correction in positive ways. Additionally, coaches can be educated on healthy emotional coping and regulation for themselves (Roxas & Ridinger, 2016). These efforts to change coaching education and include mental health awareness and positive coaching styles must also be done at the larger level, where roadblocks may be experienced. Sport social workers must influence administration of athletic organizations and schools of the importance of changing policy and practice through education and providing positive results of evidence-based practice.

### **Discussion**

Athletes and coaches want to optimize the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing to enhance athletic performances. Unfortunately, the competitive nature of sports can contribute to athletes developing anxiety symptoms and decreasing their overall wellbeing and performance. Social learning theory can explain how anxiety is developed and sustained in athletes. Due to the history of negative coaching styles, coaches have learned to use power and control with athletes that exasperates and sustains anxiety. Sport social workers play a pivotal role in bringing awareness to athlete's mental health, educating all individuals involved in sports, advocating for and intervening for athletes' overall wellbeing. Sport social workers can engage individuals for clinical assessments and clinical interventions as well as organizational practice interventions to

enhance athletes overall functioning and change coaching styles for positive outcomes. By use of evidence-based interventions such as CBT and mindfulness, sport social workers can restructure cognitive behaviors and teach coping skills to reduce anxiety. Sport social workers can also provide education to coaches and athletic organizations to increase mental health awareness and teach effective and appropriate styles of coaching. Sport social workers can make social change within athletics by implementing and modeling positive social learning for the current and future generations of coaches and athletes.

Sport social workers are a relatively new concentration in the profession and can be an invaluable asset in the athletic arena. Specific research on sport social workers providing awareness, education, training and modeling of autonomy-supportive coaching and athletes anxiety is needed to determine the impact of a sport social worker offering individual and team clinical support including engagement, assessments, and clinical interventions.

### **Implications for Practice/Summary**

An athlete's mental health can directly impact their physical and emotional health as well their performance. Many athletes are under pressure to perform well or face loss of playing time and other negative consequences. An athlete who is subjected to an authoritarian coaching style which increases anxiety, may find their overall wellbeing negatively impacted by a coach who is perceived as authoritarian.

While most of the extant research on authoritarian or abusive coaching styles focuses on the effects of such behavior on athletes, coaches and athletic administrators and managers deserve to learn the latest evidenced based coaching practices in order to develop a positive, supportive, and effective style to promote athlete and athletic program well-being. Coaches may benefit from reflecting on their own views about mental health in their athletes and examine their own personal barriers, if any, to implementing the best practices outlined above. (Simoni, 2022).

A more encouraging style, autonomy-supportive coaching, provides awareness of mental health, as well as skills to be supportive of athletes and tools to coach to decrease an athlete's anxiety and increase their overall wellbeing. Sport social workers can be the critical factor to providing a safe, positive environment in the athletic arena. Sport social workers can provide advocacy, education, training, and clinical skills to athletic organizations and they are a crucial part of enhancing an athlete's mental health by modeling positive behavior, engaging with athletes, and providing evidence-based interventions. Sport social workers may be the newest team member in the sport industry, but research shall prove them to be the most valuable asset in the athletic arena.

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